

³¹ [Jesus] put before them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; ³² it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches.”

³³ He told them another parable: “The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and hid it in three measures of flour until all of it was leavened.”

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and reburied; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶ on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁴⁷ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; ⁴⁸ when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ “Have you understood all this?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”

This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Every single Sunday at church, we make sure that we say the following words together, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

And we’re all ok with that. I’ve never heard anyone say that they’re uncomfortable with that language. But what is it we’re praying for exactly? What do we want when we pray for God’s kingdom to come?

What does the kingdom look like? What happens in the kingdom? Is it justice? Yes, maybe. Is it fairness. Sure. That sounds good. Is it peace? I sure hope God's kingdom is a peaceful one. But how does it function on a day to day basis for the average Joe? What is the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus tried and tried to help us see what it might be like if things on earth were like things in heaven, and Jesus used similes and metaphors so that the listeners could try to grasp the concept.

So, in the agrarian, first-century world of Palestine, he started with a mustard seed and yeast. Then, he spoke of finding valuable things and liquidating assets to get them. And, in the fifth example, he talked about casting a wide net and letting the angels sort out the good and the bad in the end.

And we could spend our time together today fleshing those parables out – working our way through five similes that we are not able to relate well to because of the time and culture we live in now - the simple fact that we don't plant or bake or fish as much as they did.

But parables are meant to be easily understood, accessible to us immediately. And they're meant to inspire us to respond, so I want to offer some parallels today that I think are true to the intention Jesus meant but contemporary, practical, historically true.

Let's start at the beginning. If the meaning of the first parable is that something quite tiny and seemingly insignificant can become life-giving and important, then hear this. The kingdom of heaven is like the twenty-one-year-old grocery store lady in Ireland whose refusal to sell produce grown in South Africa helped end apartheid and free Nelson Mandela who was imprisoned on the other side of the globe. Or the kingdom of heaven is like the child in Afghanistan who refused to stop going to school despite the Taliban's orders and inspired the world with her bravery. Or the kingdom of heaven is like the woman in Kenya who started planting trees by herself and inspired a movement of reforestation that resulted in the plantings of around 55 million trees in Africa.

And instead of talking about yeast, which some of us are familiar with, how about . . . the kingdom of heaven is like the microloan given to the single mother that becomes a successful business that helps lift her and her children and grandchildren out of the generational poverty they've been born into. Or the kingdom of God is like a community garden that grew out of a vacant lot. It begins with one person pulling weeds and planting seeds in a forgotten place. Then neighbors join in. Then children paint signs. Then vegetables appear. Then the whole block is fed. What was once abandoned becomes a place of nourishment and beauty.

Or the kingdom of God is like a viral act of kindness movement. One person anonymously pays for someone else's groceries. The cashier tells the customer the good news. That customer goes home and forgives a long-held grudge. The forgiven person calls their sister to share the news. The sister decides to volunteer at a non-profit in gratitude. Kindness spreads like yeast in a batch of dough.

Or the kingdom of God is like a therapist's office where someone finally tells the truth. The truth is whispered at first. Then it grows. Then it heals. Then it frees. And the freedom ripples outward into families, friendships, workplaces, and futures.

Or the kingdom of God is like a potluck where everyone brings what they can. Some bring homemade dishes. Some bring store-bought cookies. Some bring nothing but their hunger. And somehow there is enough for everyone, with leftovers to share.

The kingdom of God is like a block party where the neighbors learn each others names and become friends.

The kingdom of God is like a musical playlist shared between friends. One song speaks hope. Another song brings courage. Another song makes someone feel seen. By the end, the playlist becomes a soundtrack for life itself.

And then there's the third and fourth parables about the kingdom of God. In these, the point is that you're so excited that you prioritize the kingdom of heaven over everything else. It's so invaluable that you should buy into it completely. When you discover the kingdom of God – when you catch a glimpse of it – it should inspire you

and awaken in you something so desirable that you jump in headfirst. You drop what is less important. You're willing to hit reset on your life to be a part of the kingdom of heaven.

The kingdom of heaven is like getting two aces during a Texas Hold 'Em tournament. You go all in. You risk it all. They're the best cards you've ever been dealt and if you don't go all in now, when will you ever?

Or it's like selling everything and moving your family overseas and starting over because you visited a village on a vacation and got excited about your future for the first time in years.

Or maybe the kingdom is like meeting someone on a first date and falling in love and from that moment in time, the path you're on is forever changed. Nothing else is as important as being with your soulmate.

The kingdom of heaven is like all of this: small things that surprise and bless beyond their expectations, one person who inspires a movement, nearly invisible moments that reshape the world, unexpected surprises that spur big changes to our whole lives, inspiration that compels us to risk it all to be able to have it all the time, community and love that make us feel seen and heard and safe.

The original parables in Matthew are Jesus being poetic, creative, relational. He's trying so hard to help the people understand what God's reign looks like. What heaven on earth is like. It's not traditional. It's not rational or safe or practical. It's counter intuitive, so it's hard to grasp. So, after he finishes these parables, Jesus asks the disciples, us, "Have you understood all this?" and they answered, "Yes." But clearly, they're lying. We're lying. We don't get it. We still don't get it.

The kingdom of heaven is a mystery. My illustrations have not captured the kingdom of God any better than the originals did. There's still discomfort and "what abouts" and "yes, buts". I get it.

I just hope that God knows that I really am sincere when I pray that the kingdom will come on earth as it is in heaven, because while I don't fully understand what it looks like, I believe it to be better than what we've got going here right now. I believe the kingdom of heaven is more generous, more compassionate, more selfless, more friendly, more joyful, and more fun than this. I believe the rules and expectations of this world are upended in the kingdom of heaven – that the powerless are the powerful and the least expected become the heroes, and I believe . . . I truly believe . . . that if you had to sum it all up in one word, the word that describes the kingdom of God is love.

May it be so. Amen.